Knowledge and Representation in The Ambassadors: Strether's Discriminating Gaze

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The things we see somehow manifest something that transcends both the features disclosed by vision and the consciousness of the one who sees. What there is then are not things first identical with themselves, which would then offer themselves to the seer, nor is there a seer who is first empty and who, afterward, would open himself to them—but something to which we could not be closer than by palpating it with our look, things we could not dream of seeing “all naked” because the gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty

In the late James, there is a consistent emphasis on the function, the meaning and the validity of the gaze. As major characters discover that their idealized images of others, even of themselves, are flawed, their fundamental belief in human wholeness, coherence and integrity is challenged. That crucial moment when a character discovers the limitations, the frailty of his vision, is epitomized in the climactic scene of *The Ambassadors* when Strether encounters Chad Newsome and Madame de Vionnet in the French countryside. Maud Ellman argues that in this encounter, Strether discovers, not only his own blindness, but the lack in all vision; that is, he sees not only the illicit relationship between Chad and Madame de Vionnet, but, more importantly, his own failure of vision, his own mortality: “. . . he realizes that his vision all along has masked a lack.” If, as Ellman suggests, Strether’s awareness parallels that of the viewer who discovers the anamorphic blot, the death’s head in Holbein’s famous painting, “The Ambassadors,” then Strether experiences important insights into his own subjectivity, insights which suggest a level of understanding not generally attributed to him.

I would like to propose a radically new reading of Strether’s
subjectivity in *The Ambassadors*, one which challenges critical readings to date and suggests that Strether’s journey reflects a tacit but very definite confrontation with the fundamental illusion of the core self. The surface hesitation and uncertainty figured in his language, his gestures, his actions, his reflections, consistently point to an inner struggle in which Strether questions the definition of his identity imposed upon him by his society, in particular by Mrs. Newsome, and begins to explore, on his own terms, the significance of his personal history and the meaning of his subjectivity. As Strether separates from Mrs. Newsome, he engages in an act of mourning for his youth which he defines initially as a failure to have acted, to have seized his desire. However, as he follows the trajectory of his desire, initially through an identification with the “masculine” self-representation of Chad Newsome, Strether comes to see the limitations of conventional notions of masculinity. What Strether gradually discovers is that the freedom he seeks is not to be found in the illusion of power characterized by masculine control and repression but rather in its opposite, in the vulnerable acceptance of fragmentation. Thus the whole evolution of Strether’s project and his position at the end of the novel documents, much more than a process of renunciation on the part of a bewildered and indecisive gentleman as he discovers Mrs. Newsome’s callous rigidity and Madame de Vionnet’s subtle deception. It delineates Strether’s painful discovery and gradual acceptance of own incompletion. Strether may be seen, therefore, not as a modern but as a postmodern hero: his seeming passivity, his indecisiveness, his “femininity” challenge conventional masculinity which privileges phallic potency in order to sustain the illusion of wholeness, coherence, and power.

Such a reading of Strether’s character grants him a degree of agency, discriminating purpose, and courage which has been obscured by readings which emphasize his passivity and detachment. The *Ambassadors*’ highly sensitive hero is most often seen as a representative of his author’s subjectivity, reflecting James’s preference for a perceptive but detached and protected way of being in the world. Sally Sears notes that “Strether . . . joins the long list of characters in James . . . who achieve their strongest emotional satisfactions by observing the lives of others”; Kaja Silverman observes that “The prototypical Jamesian character is the one who, like Lambert Strether, gets nothing for him or herself ‘out of the whole affair’—the one who is, moreover, precisely marked by vulnerability,” and Carren Kaston argues that Strether “assume[s] the burden of emotions that do not derive
from . . . or serve [his] own interests . . . the result is a kind of absence from both self and world.”10 A number of readings have linked Strether’s passivity to the idea that he is essentially “feminine,” and psychoanalytic criticism has contributed to the notion that Strether is a victim of unconscious forces, discerning unresolved oedipal issues in his relationship with Mrs. Newsome, unacknowledged homoerotic feelings in his relationship with Chad Newsome and repressed sexual desire in his relationship with Madame de Vionnet.12

This emphasis on Strether’s passivity and vulnerability has made it more difficult to observe the consistency and power of Strether’s gaze and the philosophical consequences of his discoveries. Strether is James’s quintessential hero not because he is passive or detached but because he redefines action as a powerful kind of reflective vision13 which calls into question the very nature and purpose of conventional masculine behavior. His apparent detachment, even his “femininity,” is, in fact, a highly vulnerable and self-critical kind of analysis, through which Strether gradually repositions himself. Understanding the particular nature and power of Strether’s vision and action requires a repositioning of ourselves as readers. The belief that Strether’s subjectivity is less than fully mature, that his detached “feminine” stance is a substitute for a more courageous, “masculine,” kind of action and involvement with others,14 privileges traditional gender codes and fails to account for the profound changes in Strether which the novel explores.

In the course of his journey Strether attempts to compose a coherent reality through a series of representations; however, these portraits of other characters are consistently undermined, their contents subtly challenged. His representations of Chad, Mrs. Newsome, Maria Gostrey, and Madame de Vionnet all contain a mysterious element which is the key to both the shattering and the ultimate enlargement of Strether’s vision. Just as the anamorphic object, the naked skull in the foreground of Holbein’s painting, catches the observer in its trap,15 in each of his representations Strether uncovers a mystery, a “stain,”16 a blot, something which shatters the coherent image he tries to construct. In composing and examining his portraits of others, Strether apprehends a gaze which looks back at him, forcing him to assess the failure of his own vision and his own coherence. In Lacanian terms, we may say that Strether’s representations compel him to “see [himself] seeing [himself]” and this “reflecting reflection . . . reduce[s] the subject . . . to a power of annihilation.”17 In this moment, Strether confronts not only the limitations of percep-
tion but the illusion that the self, any self, is whole, coherent, powerful or, even, fully knowable. That is, Strether may be said to experience what Lacan describes as a “decentring from the consciousness of self,” and his consciousness ultimately reflects what postmodernists refer to, after Foucault, as an awareness of “the shattered self.”

Several critical readings of James’s novels explore the idea that his characters engage in creative constructions of self and other, and some of these readings suggest that such activities raise questions about the nature of subjectivity. Most argue, however, that James’s fiction dramatizes the difficulties and moral dangers of such creative seeing, implicitly defending an essentialist notion of self. Leo Bersani maintains that for James’s characters, “fictional invention . . . constitutes the self,” and he argues that the later novels “dramatize the difficulties of living by improvisation.” Don Anderson maintains that The Ambassadors comments extensively on the nature of aesthetic form, and that one aspect of the self-reflexive character of the novel is the emphasis placed on Strether’s “framing, shaping and structuring” of his experience; however, he believes that James’s point is to demonstrate the dangers, for moral insight, of those activities. Susan Griffin claims that “Jamesian seeing [is] an active interested struggle both to create and to preserve the self,” Julie Rivkin notes that, initially, Strether “still thinks of penetrating facades, touching at the bottom and arriving at the ‘truth,’” and Priscilla Walton maintains that Strether “desires coherence [but] does not yet realize that it is unattainable.” Except for Walton’s and Rivkin’s, these readings do not explore the challenge to essentialism implicit in Strether’s approach to knowledge, and none interprets Strether’s insights as offering a challenge to the belief in a core or essential self. Strether’s representations raise fundamental questions about how one can know another subject; however, the moral and epistemological dangers of this enterprise lie not in the uncontrollability of perception but in believing that such control is necessary or desirable. In fact, one of the most explicit themes of The Ambassadors concerns the dangers of believing in such control, as Strether’s growing knowledge of Mrs. Newsome’s limitations suggests. The Ambassadors traces a revolution in Strether’s consciousness as he gradually rejects the false objectivity which governs Mrs. Newsome’s perspective and learns to accept a more fragile perspective, associated with Madame de Vionnet, through whom he learns to live with ambiguity.

From the outset, Strether reveals a complex and contradictory, but
The Ambassadors

far from passive, set of intentions. In order to clarify Strether’s subtle agency, let us consider what he actually does. He goes on a quest for Mrs. Newsome to retrieve her son; the reward for successful completion of this task will be marriage to Mrs. Newsome. However, instead of moving to complete the task, as requested, Strether, from the moment he arrives in Europe, begins to question the purpose and validity of his mission. Once he encounters Chad and then meets Madame de Vionnet, he becomes extremely active, but not in the conventional masculine sense. Subjecting everything he sees to an acute visual and emotional examination, Strether creates a series of images, a comprehensive visual text, through which he begins to question his relationship with Mrs. Newsome. In allowing himself to be emotionally seduced by Paris and Madame de Vionnet, Strether is fully aware that he is violating the terms of his contract with Mrs. Newsome, and although his ambiguous position causes him much confusion and concern, he persists in his course. Strether then proceeds to reverse Mrs. Newsome’s test: just as she has sent him over to fulfill her expectations, through deliberate inaction (he refuses to return home and insists that Chad remain with him), he forces Mrs. Newsome (or, rather, her emissaries) to come to Paris. What Strether wants to find out is whether or not Mrs. Newsome (embodied in her daughter, Sarah Pocock) is spiritually capable of seeing what he has seen, of appreciating Madame de Vionnet. Both Mrs. Newsome and Sarah fail his test just as he has failed theirs. His imposition of this test brings about the end of his relationship with his fiancée, and if he experiences some ambivalence, it is certainly not strong enough for him to swallow his pride and make amends with her. Finally, Strether also faces the “truth” of the relationship between Chad and Madame de Vionnet: he grapples with his own self-blinding desire to see Madame de Vionnet as “pure,” and accepts her imperfection and vulnerability without sacrificing his beautiful portrait of her. Thus, Strether is not necessarily as naive or passive as some critics have suggested; his reflective, voyeuristic way of understanding the world is, in fact, extremely active, but it is an approach which reflects a questioning and gradual rejection of masculine resolve and action in favor of a more complex (possibly feminine) understanding of agency and knowledge. Strether’s increasing ability to see, imaginatively, creatively, aesthetically, is precisely his most important skill. Far from blinding him, it enables him to glimpse the complexity, the ambiguity and, ultimately, the mystery of others.

When Waymarsh asks Strether, “Then what did you come over
for?” and he replies, “Well, I suppose exactly to see for myself—without their aid” (133), James’s hero articulates a subtly rebellious intention to separate his own perceptions from those of Mrs. Newsome, suggesting a private purpose clearly at odds with his ostensible mission. In fact, it is his deep sense of loss, of having missed out on something important in life, much more than his mission, which most insistently and poignantly shapes his response to Europe: “There were sequences he had missed and great gaps in the procession: he might have been watching it all recede in a golden cloud of dust” (118). Although he believes that he has somehow failed to assert himself and therefore failed to “live,” Strether’s quest for experience is undertaken, not through an assertion of “masculine” resolve (though he is aware that this is what his mission and Mrs. Newsome demand) but rather through a consistent rejection of the conventional masculine position. As early as his initial encounter with Maria Gostrey, it is clear that Strether is unable to make even the pretence of adopting a masculine stance. Each effort Maria makes to define and accept Strether in conventionally masculine terms is rejected: when she tells him she likes his name (63), he tells her she won’t have heard of it (65); when she observes that he looks as if he is doing something wrong, he admits he is afraid of her. This fundamental vulnerability, which has been seen as a kind of self-emascula
tion, may instead suggest a tacit questioning of the masculine position Mrs. Newsome has imposed on her emissary. The reunion with Waymarsh which follows his encounter with Maria confirms such a reading, for Strether wishes only to put distance between himself and his friend’s repressive and conventionally masculine point of view. Like Mrs. Newsome, Waymarsh asserts complete authority and imposes a single coherent interpretation, a set of judgments about Europe and its inhabitants with little reference to external facts. Waymarsh’s gruff and judgmental resistance to “the ordeal of Europe” (71), his rigid moralism, mirrors Strether’s own future: utter compliance with a predetermined code which will deny him the possibility of experiencing life on his own terms. Observing his companions, Waymarsh, Maria Gostrey, Chad Newsome, Madame de Vionnet and then the Pococks who come to replace him, Strether composes portraits of each of them, only to glimpse something behind the surface image which challenges their coherence. Like the viewer standing before Holbein’s painting who sees the naked skull only when his angle of vision shifts, Strether, once he has arrived in Europe, begins to see the rigid preconceptions
of his New England counterparts; and, through this “double consciousness,” he is partially able to suspend the values which have been imposed on him and to explore alternative ways of seeing which do not privilege masculine control and which do not necessarily lead to a single, coherent, representation of another. In thus identifying the lack in all vision, Strether’s visual representations of others point to something Lacan refers to as “an encounter with the real.”

That is, Strether’s images allow him to glimpse, for a brief moment, that unnameable reality which lies outside the symbolic order (“the sphere of culture and language”) and which therefore defines the inadequacy of perception and the limitations of knowledge. And, since each portrait also reflects Strether’s own lack, as he projects his own desire for completion onto his subject, it marks a stage in the process of mourning Strether undergoes as he gradually relinquishes his belief in the illusory ideal of masculine power and coherence and redefines himself as a vulnerable desiring subject.

“I began to be young, or at least to get the benefit of it, the moment I met you at Chester, and that’s what has been taking place ever since.”

—The Ambassadors, 305

In this matter of the visible, everything is a trap. . .

—Lacan

In Book Second of The Ambassadors, when Maria Gostrey comes to dine with Strether at his hotel, she immediately becomes an image of his lost desire: “Miss Gostrey had dined with him . . . face to face over a small table on which the lighted candles had rose-coloured shades; and the rose-coloured shades and the small table and the soft fragrance of the lady . . . were so many touches in he scarce knew what positive high picture” (89). As Strether gazes at the “broad red velvet band” which encircles Maria’s neck, the moment is infused with uncertainty, for his masculine identity is decentered: “What . . . had a man, conscious of a man’s work in the masculine world to do with red velvet bands?” (90). This image of desire is thus a trap: the red velvet band is the “stain” in the picture, generating in Strether “fresh backward, fresh forward, fresh lateral flights” (90) and challenging the masculine control of Mrs. Newsome and the
power of her contrasting and distinctly asexual “ruche” which reminds him of Queen Elizabeth.

Strether recognizes that, in tempting him to enjoy her seductive femininity, Maria challenges him to defy Woollett’s definition of appropriate masculine behavior. But Strether sees something more. In contrasting Mrs. Newsome’s repressiveness to Maria’s seductiveness, Strether resents the way Mrs. Newsome has denied him an important kind of pleasure: “With Mrs. Newsome, there had been no little confronted dinner, no pink lights, no whiff of vague sweetness . . . one of the results of which was that at present, mildly rueful, but with a sharpish accent, he actually asked himself why there hadn’t” (90-91). It is, in fact, Woollett’s refusal to enjoy life that accounts in part for Strether’s own failure. As he gazes at Maria, he suddenly sees himself being seen by her and, reflected in her gaze, is his own nothingness. He recalls “the period of conscious detachment occupying the centre of his life,” “the grey middle desert . . .” after the death of his wife and child (91). Strether’s poignant reflection initiates the first stage in his act of mourning, for he recognizes the fundamental truth that he himself is not in the picture, that he has lived, essentially, on the sidelines, allowing others to dictate the rules. As he turns his gaze inward, Strether discerns that his failure is only partially a result of his literal inaction; it is also based on his unacknowledged acceptance of Woollett’s repressive codes.

As the rigid representation of reality as “truth” inscribed by Woollett is juxtaposed to the more complex, ambiguous reality suggested by Paris, the latter offers Strether the space of fantasy and therefore a way in which he can explore alternatives to Woollett’s values. From his private dinner with Maria, Strether is transported to the theater where he feels “as if the play itself penetrated him” (92). Noting that “The figures and faces in the stalls were interchangeable with those on the stage” (92), Strether allows himself to enter the world of representation. It is as if he senses that he can take the risk he failed to take in his youth by allowing himself to be duped, by giving up control of his gaze, what Lacan refers to as the laying down of one’s gaze. When Chad Newsome silently enters this theater in the midst of the performance, he, too, becomes part of the tableau vivant. Instantly, for Strether, Chad is much more than Chad: his “massive young manhood” (166) takes on mythic proportions, and he becomes an “irreducible young pagan” embodying the enviable power and potency of youth. Chad’s apparent maturity and confidence challenges Strether, making him feel “like a schoolboy” (155).
But Chad’s palpable masculine presence, “perhaps enviable,” is also “ominous” (166). This encounter with Chad, like the subsequent encounter with the famous artist, Gloriani, forces Strether to confront his ambivalence about his own masculinity. When the sculptor challenges Strether with his gaze, Strether feels exposed, tested, put on trial. Gloriani’s powerful gaze, like Chad’s “pagan” masculinity, seems literally to penetrate Strether’s psyche: it is “a long straight shaft sunk by a personal acuteness that life has seasoned to steel” (200). Yet, gradually, the phallic potency of Chad and Gloriani is called into question: Chad has an air of “designedly showing himself”; his “palpable presence” is, in effect, a “presentation”; his “sense of power” is “oddly perverted” (169-70), and Gloriani soon betrays “a charming hollow civility on which Strether wouldn’t have trusted his own full weight a moment” (250). If Strether is initially seduced, even rendered “feminine,” the object of the masculine gaze, as the phallic imagery surrounding Gloriani and Chad suggests, it is also a moment in which Strether glimpses the inherent lack in this phallic stance.33

Strether’s focus slowly shifts from Chad’s sexuality to the fact that Chad is no longer Chad but, seemingly, a different person, a product of the fantasy space of Paris both he and Strether have entered. Chad’s transformation fascinates Strether, for, until this moment, he has viewed identity as something given, and this belief has been a source of his hopelessness. The idea of a new, radically different identity begins to undermine Strether’s preconceptions—about Chad and about himself. Initially, Strether falls back on an essentialist metaphor to describe Chad’s transformation: once “shapeless,” Chad has been put into a “firm mould” and “turned successfully out” (167). However, Strether’s image raises paradoxical, even contradictory questions about the nature of identity. At what point does the “mould” impose itself? Can one be shattered and then “remoulded”? Does the “mould” alter the surface only or the entire person? If Chad’s “mould” can be broken, why can’t Strether’s?

A closer connection between Chad’s altered surface and Strether’s own identity is established shortly after their initial encounter when Strether analyzes his own personal history using the same “mould” image in the scene James fondly refers to as the “germ” of his novel. “The affair of life—couldn’t, no doubt, have been different for me,” he tells Little Bilham, “for it’s at the best a tin mould . . . into which, a helpless jelly, one’s consciousness, is poured—so that one ‘takes’ the form . . . and is more or less compactly held by it . . .” (215). On
the surface, his insistence on this image suggests that, for Strether, it has always been too late, and the tone of lament that emerges as he contemplates his loss seems to confirm a kind of hopelessness: “There were some things that had to come in time if they were to come at all. If they didn’t come in time they were lost forever. It was the general sense of them that had overwhelmed him with its long slow rush” (214). However, through a recognition of his emotions, through a reliving of his loss, Strether reaches a new and vulnerable place. Towards the end of this scene, Strether asks Little Bilham, “But what am I to myself?” (216). In this moment, we may say that Strether’s identity is “split”; that is, he recognizes a separation between the one who speaks (“myself”) and that which is represented by the speech act (“I”). He has begun to recognize that there is always a gap between the “self” (however it is defined) and the various ways that “self” is represented, that the “self” both is and is not its various representations, however they are “moulded.” It is clear that Strether’s discovery of the “new” Chad has helped him to see that the original “mould” may be broken. Indirectly, Chad has liberated Strether to examine his own identity in a way which holds out the possibility of hope.

As Strether seeks to understand his own personal lack, Chad and Madame de Vionnet become conscious projections of his own desire: “The point is that they’re mine. Yes, they’re my youth; since somehow at the right time nothing else ever was” (306). Through Chad, Strether enters into a relationship with Madame de Vionnet, and, in her, Strether creates a fantasy object, a substitute for his lack, through whom he vicariously experiences the love he missed in his youth. When Strether meets Madame de Vionnet, he recognizes that he is being tempted, tested, drawn in, invited to relinquish his own controlling gaze. However, what initially distinguishes Madame de Vionnet from Mrs. Newsome is not her sexuality or her capacity to create mystery; it is her ability to reach Strether in a very personal way, to make emotional contact with him. This is something she does silently and, seemingly, without effort. When Strether has his first private meeting with Madame de Vionnet, he finds her “seated, near the fire . . . with her hands clasped in her lap and no movement, in all her person, but the fine prompt play of her deep young face” (238). In terms of Woollett’s repressive codes, once again, Strether feels that he is losing touch with reality, and he notes the powerful effect of Madame de Vionnet’s personal style: “she had
only after all to smile at him ever so gently in order to make him ask himself if he weren’t already going crooked” (211).

As Lacan suggests, the artist “invites the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his gaze there as one lays down one’s weapons.” Madame de Vionnet is a true artist, and she represents herself in such a way that Strether is emotionally disarmed: “Then it was that he saw how she had decidedly come all the way; and there accompanied it an extraordinary sense of her raising from somewhere below him her beautiful suppliant eyes” (238). Her vulnerability is defined in a portrait in which she is the outsider, rather than Strether: “He might have been perched at his doorstep and she standing in the road. . . . It had been sad of a sudden, with a sadness that was like a cold breath in his face” (238-39). Her isolation is, in this moment, a mirror image of his own, for, like Strether, she seeks to rectify the past, to have the love, intimacy that was denied her in her youth. Although Strether does not know that her personal history and present desire bear a similarity to his own, his gaze has been trapped because he has glimpsed something behind the image which reminds him of himself, a vulnerable incompletion. As Strether’s fragmentation finds its reflection in Madame de Vionnet, she becomes “an all powerful signifier that will make up for the lost object”, in this way Strether begins to mourn and come to terms with his own incompleteness.

In contrast to the controlling and rigid masculine image of Mrs. Newsome, Madame de Vionnet’s power is defined in a complex and elusive image of ambiguity and mystery. Strether is struck by her infinite variety and multiplicity, by her capacity to reshape ordinary experience into something mythical: “Above all she suggested to him the reflection that the femme du monde—in these finest developments of the type—was like Cleopatra in the play, indeed various and multifold. She had aspects, characters, days, nights. . . . She was an obscure person, a muffled person one day, and a showy person, an uncovered person the next” (256). However, a “stain” in the portrait makes it impossible for Strether to shape a coherent image. As with Maria’s red velvet band and Chad’s pagan masculinity, Madame de Vionnet’s sexuality (figured in Strether’s recognition that she is not only a “goddess still partly engaged in a morning cloud” but also a “sea-nymph waist-high in the summer surge” [256]) is a surface clue, pointing to something deeper, something which renders Strether’s gaze inadequate. In the midst of attempting to “render” her, Strether abandons his effort to compose a coherent image:
...thanks to one of the short-cuts of genius, she had taken all his categories by surprise” (257). Within a deliberately composed frame, Strether’s portrait is all chaos; however, it is a chaos which he embraces because it identifies precisely what is lacking in his relationship with Mrs. Newsome. As Priscilla Walton suggests, Madame de Vionnet “actually personifies the open text”; she “helps Strether to evolve away from a single referential reading toward polyvocal interpretation.” Madame de Vionnet’s ambiguity evokes in Strether a sense of mystery and delight; however, the part of her which persistently eludes definition also points to the unformed and unnameable “real” which lies behind all symbolic structures. The presence of this mystery undermines the essentialist position that one’s own or another’s subjectivity can be fully defined.

Strether’s commitment to Madame de Vionnet reaches its climax, not when he achieves clarity, for this is impossible, but in the instant when her ambiguity is most irreducible. When he enters the cathedral of Notre Dame one afternoon seeking “a refuge from the obsession of his problem” (271)—that of the choice between Mrs. Newsome and Madame de Vionnet—Strether seems, almost literally, to step outside himself and to see himself in the act of disengaging from Woollett, from the world that insists that he take a clear position and act decisively, that he condemn those who do not fit Woollett’s mold. He sees himself as “a plain tired man” seeking refuge from “the hard outer light” (271). Within the cathedral, Strether discerns a mysterious woman whose mood, he senses, matches his own. However, he imagines this woman to be more profoundly at peace than he can ever be: “she had placed herself, as he never did, within the focus of the shrine, and she had lost herself, he could easily see, as he would only have liked to do...” (273). Once again, however, something in the picture, subtly undermines the peaceful image Strether has created.

Even before Strether knows that this is Madame de Vionnet, an implicit contradiction challenges the coherence of his portrait: if she seems, on the one hand, “one of the familiar, the intimate, the fortunate,” she is neither “prostrate” nor “bowed,” but only “strangely fixed” (273). He asks himself, “But what had such a woman come for if she hadn’t come to pray?” (273). Shortly after discovering that the mysterious woman is in fact Madame de Vionnet, Strether makes a commitment to believe in her. That is, paradoxically, at the moment he recognizes that his image of Madame de Vionnet is his own construction (“she reminded our friend... of some fine firm
concentrated heroine of an old story” [273]), he decides that the relationship between Chad and Madame de Vionnet must be pure: “Unassailably innocent was a relation that could make one of the parties to it so carry herself” (276). A shift has occurred in Strether’s consciousness, from a commitment to “reality” as objectively knowable to a commitment based on personal and subjective choice: it is, in a sense, a contract made between the perceiver and his subject.

Although Strether recognizes that his commitment to Madame de Vionnet will destroy his relationship with Mrs. Newsome, he experiences in this alliance a moment of personal liberation: “. . . he made, under Madame de Vionnet’s protection . . . his first personal point” (339). Or, as he tells Sarah, somewhat perversely, “‘What has really happened has been that, all the while, I’ve done what I came out for’” (339). In his refusal to return home at Mrs. Newsome’s command or to act decisively in bringing Chad around, Strether forces Woollett to come to Paris, and Woollett’s test of his values becomes Strether’s test of theirs.”38 When the representatives of Woollett confront the representatives of Paris, Strether can truly assess the distance he has traveled. In the emotional contrasts between Sarah Pocock and Madame de Vionnet, Strether is able to see clearly the source of his complaint against Mrs. Newsome. The two adversaries meet, at Sarah’s hotel, in a climactic tableau vivant, which Strether observes from the sidelines. The two pairs of gazes, Sarah’s and Madame de Vionnet’s, challenge each other. As Strether watches Mrs. Newsome’s emissary deal with Madame de Vionnet, he sees “something fairly hectic in Sarah’s face” (335). Madame de Vionnet, in contrast, strikes him as “prepared infinitely to conciliate.” Her eyes are “exquisitely expressive” where Sarah’s gaze reveals only “a dry glitter that recalled to him a fine Woollett winter morning” (339). Sarah speaks “a little piercingly” whereas Madame de Vionnet “breathes” her words “to the air” (340). Repeatedly, the rigid harshness of Sarah is contrasted to the skillful feminine gentleness of Madame de Vionnet. Strether’s complaint about Sarah is that she cannot appreciate alterity or ambiguity; in fact, she is morally opposed to it, for it threatens her own coherence and control. What he is waiting for her to see is precisely what is impossible for Sarah or her mother to understand, that one must risk ambiguity and concede control, that the inability to do so is not based on moral rectitude but a cowardly adherence to a single controlling self, and a harsh rejection of the vulnerability and incompleteness which Strether has come to share with Madame de Vionnet.
Shortly after this confrontation between Woollett and Paris, Sarah effectively disposes of Strether, letting him know how deeply his admiration for Madame de Vionnet has hurt Mrs. Newsome. In the wake of this rejection, Strether looks squarely at the original sense of loss (the failure of vision and resolve in his life) which has haunted him, and his mourning enters a new phase. As if he has reached the end of his journey, Strether finds himself alone once again in Chad’s rooms, where his quest for his own “masculinity” began. In a private moment of reflection which so often marks a dramatic climax for a Jamesian character, Strether brings the empty unformed past into the present, feels it, for the first time, as a palpable thing:

He felt, strangely, as sad as if he had come for some wrong, and yet as excited as if he had come for some freedom. But the freedom was what was most in the place and the hour; it was the freedom that most brought him round again to the youth of his own that he had long ago missed. He could have explained little enough to-day either why he had missed it or why, after years and years, he should care that he had; the main truth of the actual appeal of everything was none the less that everything represented the substance of his loss, put it within reach, within touch, made it, to a degree it had never been, an affair of the senses. That was what it became for him at this singular time, the youth he had long ago missed, a queer concrete presence, full of mystery, yet full of reality. (426)

This is Strether’s fullest moment of personal recognition, a poignant awareness of his loss. However, Strether is not simply mourning his failure to be the masculine subject Chad represents. Given his astute and reflective scrutiny of his youthful alter ego’s perfect yet hollow masculinity (“a smile that pleased exactly in the right degree” [427]) and his powerful recognition that Mrs. Newsome’s coherence is also flawed, Strether’s apprehension of his own lost youth, his failed masculinity, is really a metaphor for a more universal lack, one which embraces Chad, Mrs. Newsome and even Madame de Vionnet, that of human frailty and incompleteness, and, ultimately, mortality. He has been “brought round again to the youth of his own that he had long ago missed”; in his experience of this loss, Strether completes his act of mourning. We may say then that Strether is now aware of his fragile subject position, of the fact that no one is master of his representations, of himself or of anyone else. The individual is always, literally, outside the picture, that is,
outside the world he represents to himself through images. As Lacan observes, “The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am not in the picture. That which is light looks at me, and by means of that light in the depths of my eye, something is painted . . . but something that is an impression . . . which is in no way mastered by me.” 39 “Individuality is both one’s ‘true’ self and someone else’s fiction, thus inherently alien or other.” 40 If Strether experiences “the substance of his loss,” he also discovers his “freedom”: in this moment, he begins to accept his shattered self.

Strether is now able to analyze Sarah Pocock with a new kind of integrity and strength, and a clarity of vision he has not had before. In a conversation with Maria Gostrey, he creates a harsh portrait that explains his rejection of Mrs. Newsome and the values of Woollett. “That’s just her difficulty,” Strether tells Maria, speaking of Sarah, but, in actuality, invoking Mrs. Newsome, “that she doesn’t admit surprises . . . that she’s all, as I’ve called it, fine cold thought. She had, to her own mind, worked the whole thing out in advance, and worked it out for me as well as for herself . . . there’s no room left; no margin, as it were, for any alteration” (447). In Sarah’s rigidity, Strether sees Mrs. Newsome’s controlling masculine essentialism as something which inscribes an emotional and intellectual prison; he sees that, for him, too, there will be no room, no margin for “alteration.” 41 When Maria suggests the possibility of modification (“You’ve got to make over, altogether, the woman herself?”), Strether’s reply is almost brutal: “What it comes to . . . is that you’ve got morally and intellectually to get rid of her” (447). In effect, this is Strether’s real (and little noted) moment of active renunciation and growth. In his rejection of Mrs. Newsome, Strether renounces his belief in a single, coherent image of his own life; he no longer wishes to have “the whole thing [worked] out in advance” (447).

Strether continues to assess Mrs. Newsome’s rigidity, (“his eyes might have been fixing some particularly large iceberg in a cool blue northern sea. . .” [448]) in a blatant phallic image which stands in stark contrast to Madame de Vionnet’s fluid and mysterious subjectivity. The warmth and grace, the sexuality and imagination which characterize Madame de Vionnet are profoundly absent. Strether’s comparative portraits of Mrs. Newsome and Madame de Vionnet, his clear rejection of the former and his embrace of the latter, articulate his plea for the possibility of imagination and mystery, with the recognition that real control, coherence or wholeness is illusory and the effort to sustain that illusion is soul destroying. Mrs. Newsome
cannot see beyond her own constructs; she cannot return Strether’s gaze. Her absence is emblematic of her blindness, and her blindness is emblematic of her inability to connect, to love. In contrast, Madame de Vionnet, in the end, can do nothing but see; she returns Strether’s gaze and reveals herself as a vulnerable subject. It is this same vulnerability which defines Strether’s own progress. Through his own willingness to “lay down his gaze,” Strether comes to acknowledge the mystery of the other. Not ceding his desire for mystery is also what brings about an understanding of the frailty of the constructed self, the illusion that lies behind all vision and psychological acts of representation.

“What more than a vain appearance does the wisest of us know?”


The world is merely the fantasy through which thought sustains itself.

—Lacan

There remains, for Strether, a final confrontation which will enable him to come to terms with his own image-making and his own mortality. Strether’s climactic picture, his “Lambinet,” in which the values of Boston (where he first saw the Lambinet) and of the French countryside come into open conflict, forces Strether to confront directly the most threatening aspect of the world he has sought to understand through his representations. As the small boat which holds Chad and Madame de Vionnet comes into view, the lady with the parasol turns, and Strether glimpses her face. In the moments leading up to this scene, Strether has recognized that he has been at the height of his composing (“There had been all day at bottom the spell of the picture . . . essentially more than anything else a scene and a stage. . .” [456]). What collapses then is not the “reality”—whatever that may be—but Strether’s own image-making process. The frame of Strether’s picture breaks open: its contents become chaotic: the boat, so tranquil a moment before “went a little wild” (462); the pink parasol, so perfectly reflecting the controlled center of interest Strether believes he wishes to maintain, exposes for a brief moment and then eclipses Madame de Vionnet. The sublime facade of Streth-
er’s ideal love-object is destroyed, exposing not only Madame de Vionnet’s deception, but also her frailty, her mortality.

The scene which follows this dramatic tableau explores not only the collapse of Strether’s illusion, but the inevitable replacement of that illusion, underscoring the fact that “the real,” that which lies behind all image-making, can only be glimpsed briefly before it is lost to the necessary language of representation. In the awkward dinner which Strether, Chad and Madame de Vionnet are forced to share, subsequent to their chance meeting, each of them continues to play the role which has been previously agreed upon. It is now Chad’s and Madame de Vionnet’s “fiction and fable” which are “inevitably in the air”; it is they who have “something to put a face upon” (465). Their elaborate posturing underscores the necessity of the mask—the arbitrary shape which must be given to identity.43 The gazes they exchange are opaque; they deny what each actually sees. Yet it is as if the naked skull is present at the table, for Strether now sees another image behind the mask: Madame de Vionnet’s performance falters “as if she had asked herself . . . what after all was the use” (466). Strether knows, for the first time, that Chad and Madame de Vionnet have lied to him; they know, for the first time, that he sees their masks. But the masks Strether now sees are the mould he has been struggling to understand from the beginning: they are the shape each individual assumes, the necessary but wholly inadequate language which reflects both the lie and the truth of subjectivity. The real “lie” is the illusion that any real distinction is possible between “true” and “false” representations of the self because that distinction is based on the illusory belief in an essential and knowable core self. The deconstruction of Strether’s “Lambinet,” the breaking open of the frame of his most important picture, brings about not only a dramatic reversal, but the shattering of his belief in a coherent subjectivity—for Madame de Vionnet—and, ultimately, for himself.44

In Strether’s private meditation following his return to Paris, he struggles to reconcile the contradictory images of this relationship: “He kept making of it that there had been simply a lie in the charming affair” (466); yet he also sees “the deep, deep truth of the intimacy revealed” (468). In the end he recognizes that the “lie” and the “truth” must both be accepted. In his last meeting with Madame de Vionnet, Strether embraces her contradictions in a complex portrait in which her mythic elements have been subdued but not lost: “She was older for him to-night, visibly less exempt from the touch of
time . . . he could see her there as vulgarly troubled, in very truth, as a maidservant crying for her young man” (483). The vulnerability Madame de Vionnet evinced during their first private encounter is present again and her trouble has been named; however, for Strether, she has lost neither her mystery nor her beauty: “she was as much as ever the finest and subtlest creature, the happiest apparition, it had been given him, in all his years, to meet . . .” (483).

Why, then, does Strether “abandon” Madame de Vionnet, and how does his position at the end of the novel reflect an acceptance of the shattered, fragmented nature of all subjectivity? Critics have focused on Strether’s consistency as the ambassador who claims to seek nothing for himself, yet the renunciation he professes is not consistent with his emotional stance or his actions throughout the novel. On the contrary, his real mission has been a personal one: that is, despite his disclaimers, he has struggled consistently to discover and to have something for himself, at last. As James puts it, “. . . his fingers close, before he has done, round the stem of the full-blown flower. . . .” (Preface, 33). Once Strether has separated from Mrs. Newsome, from the phallic mother, he recognizes that he can “toddle alone” (303). And Madame de Vionnet has been Strether’s sublime or ideal love object, through whom he has finally confronted his desire. But she is also the fantasy object through whom he has successfully learned to mourn his lost self. Like Hamlet, in learning to mourn, Strether is able to reconstitute his own identity.

In his final portrait of Madame de Vionnet, Strether redefines knowledge—not as rigid certainty—but as trust, based on the exchange of images we create and choose to believe in. If, initially, Strether’s decision to see one thing, is, simultaneously, a decision not to see something else, ultimately, in his portrait of Madame de Vionnet, he embraces her contradictions. Perhaps, then, what is most important is precisely what Strether’s journey allows him to keep: a kind of truth which is based on this subjective trust: “. . . once more and yet once more, he could trust her. That is he could trust her to make deception right. As she presented things the ugliness—goodness knew why—went out of them” (477). In this moment, Strether understands that all knowledge is a cultural construction and an act of faith.

Madame de Vionnet has shaped Strether’s “encounter with the real” his glimpse behind the screen of language, of representation. Moreover, Strether’s clear rejection of the controlling stance of Mrs. Newsome is a rejection of an essentialism which privileges a false
coherence. As he tells Maria, “I do what I didn’t before—I see her” (510). Strether’s acceptance of the complex identity of Madame de Vionnet has resulted in a profound decentering of Strether’s own subjectivity. This decentering, however, is not a failure, a weakness, but a strength, because his belief in the symbolic order (the “vanitas” of Holbein’s ambassadors) has been challenged. The question James raises in the preface to the novel (“Is there time for reparation?”) has been answered in the affirmative. Strether’s dynamic, shifting and ambiguous images have enabled him to redefine his mission and to acquire the courage necessary to confront and accept his own shattered self.

Fiorello H. LaGuardia Community College, CUNY

Notes


3. In Henry James and the Lust of the Eyes (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), Tintner identifies this painting as a possible source for both the title and the major themes of James’s novel. She notes that James did not title his novel until 1900, after the correct identification of Holbein’s subjects (the French ambassadors, Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve), and she strengthens the association between Holbein’s painting and James’s novel in her analysis of the carpe diem and memento mori themes which are represented in both works: iconographically in Holbein’s painting through the anamorphic object (the naked skull) in the foreground and thematically in James’s novel (92).

4. Ellman is drawing on Lacan’s analysis of Holbein’s painting: “...the singular object floating in the foreground, which is there ... in order to catch ... in its trap, the observer ... reflects our own nothingness, in the figure of the death’s head” (Four Fundamental Concepts, ed. Jacques-Alain Millar, trans. Alan Sheridan [New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1977]), 92.

5. “‘Oh Chad!’—it was that rare youth he should have enjoyed being ‘like,’” (The Ambassadors [London: Penguin, 1986], 217). All further citations from James’s novel are from this edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text.


7. Susan Griffin notes that two misconceptions can be traced to the
beginnings of James criticism: “that observation and experience are opposed in James, and that the Jamesian protagonist is a ‘passive observer,’ a cerebral, almost bodiless being, completely detached from the world of experience” (The Historical Eye: The Texture of the Visual in Late James [Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991], 396). She cites as the earliest example, Percy Lubbock’s 1920 essay, “The Mind of the Artist.”


12. Abbott claims that Strether is repeatedly placed in “a feminine context,” that from the outset, “gender reversal” characterizes his relations with women. “What Strether finds in Europe . . . is not sexual activity or fulfillment but sexual . . . use at the hands of women. . . . Strether is not a kept man, but his maleness is of use to Mrs. Newsome and Madame de Vionnet . . . as a way to preserve their power” (180). Silverman (158) and Elizabeth Dalton discern evidence of a Freudian “primal scene” in Strether’s discovery of the relationship between Chad and Madame de Vionnet (“Recognition and Renunciation in The Ambassadors,” Partisan Review 59 [1992]: 462). For a reading of the homoerotic connection between Chad and Strether, see Georges-Michael Sarotte, Like a Brother, Like a Lover: Male Homosexuality in the American Novel from Herman Melville to James Baldwin (New York: Anchor, 1978), 203-11.


14. Richard Chase argues that “the general lack of masculine reciproca-
tion, especially in Strether himself, accounts in part for . . . the softness at
the center of life . . . in James’s novel” (Twelve Original Essays on Great Amer-
ican Novels, ed. Charles Shapiro [Detroit: Wayne State University Press,
1958], 136).


16. Lacan defines the “stain” as “that which governs the gaze most se-
cretly and that which always escapes from the grasp of that form of vision
that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness” (Concepts,
74). Madame de Vionnet’s ambiguity enables Strether to glimpse this split
between what can be known/seen and what consistently escapes his repre-
sentations.

17. Ibid., 81.

18. Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoan-
80.

19. Foucault attributes this notion to Bataille who “makes us aware of the
shattering of the philosophical subject” (“A Preface to Transgression,” in
Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews, trans.
Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977],
43). Foucault elaborates: “The breakdown of philosophical subjectivity and
its dispersion in a language that dispossesses it while multiplying it within
the space created by its absence is probably one of the fundamental struc-
tures of contemporary thought” (42).

20. Leo Bersani, A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature
(Boston: Little Brown, 1976), 132.

21. Bersani takes the idea of creative composing to an almost anarchic
conclusion: “What James asks us to do in his later fiction is to detach
the notions of reality and probability from all such external references—which
is to say that he would encourage us to believe that our range of experience
can be as great as our range of compositional resource” (132). Strether’s
compositions can be rescued from such relativism/anarchy by looking at
the way Strether gradually defines an incomplete subjectivity as a valid ba-
sis for personal knowledge.

22. Don Anderson, “Can Strether Step into the Same River Twice? The

23. Griffin, 18.

Fiction (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 75; originally published as


26. Walton suggests that “Madame de Vionnet actually personifies the
open text, which she then helps Strether to interpret plurally. Strether
evolves through each woman’s tutelage to the point where he, too, ultimately,
embraces multiplicity” (105); Rivkin argues that in the course of the nov-
el, “the model of a single explanatory reality behind all appearance is
challenged. . .” (76).

27. Several critical readings regard Strether as initially committed to his
mission. Sears, for example, describes him as “fully primed with the Wool-
lett concept” (109), undergoing change only after he encounters Chad and
Phyllis van Slyck

Madame de Vionnet. But Strether’s mission is psychologically compromised before he meets anyone: in his desire that Waymarsh’s countenance not be “the first ‘note’ of Europe,” for example, since Waymarsh is clearly a stand-in for Mrs. Newsome.

28. See Abbott and Wise.


32. Ibid., 101.

33. Jonathan Lee explains Lacan’s analysis of the phallus thus: “The phallus . . . serves to signify that fullness of being, that complete identity, the lack of which is the fact of our ineluctable want of being” (Jacques Lacan [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990], 67).

34. Lee glosses Lacan’s tripartite structure of the human subject: “The Lacanian subject is the uneasy coexistence of three distinct moments. There is, first of all, the real ‘presence that is speaking to you,’ the speaking body, the subject of the actual act of enunciation. Secondly, there is the symbolic subject indicated by the je of the speaking body’s discourse, the subject of the statement actually uttered. The third moment of the subject, distinct from both the speaking body and the je, is the imaginary moi constructed early in childhood to give the subject an identity that it really lacks” (82). Evans explains the concept of the split subject thus: “. . . the subject can never be anything but divided, split, alienated from himself . . . the split denotes the impossibility of the ideal of a fully present self-consciousness; the subject will never know himself completely . . .” (192).


36. Lee, 118.

37. Walton, 105, 110.


40. Ragland-Sullivan, 106.

41. According to Rivkin, Mrs. Newsome is “the absent authority who stands behind all the novel’s ambassadors, she sends her delegates off with the express understanding that they alter nothing of that for which they stand in . . . her fixity of purpose makes it impossible for her to imagine any shift or deviation” (67-68).


43. As Lacan notes, “How can one deny that nothing of the world appears to me except in my representations?” (Concepts, 81.)

44. Ellman comments extensively on this scene in relation to Lacan:
“‘There is something whose absence can always be observed in a picture,’ hints Lacan. What bursts through the picture frame at last, like the return of the repressed, are the unbidden figures of sexuality” (109). Like Silverman and Elizabeth Dalton (“Recognition and Renunciation in The Ambassadors, Partisan Review 59 [1992]: 462), Ellman discerns the site of a primal scene; however, Ellman links this insight to Lacan’s more complex notion of the subject’s annihilation.

45. See Holland and Matthiessen.